

Braving Dragons

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Summary: Years after the war between Vikings and dragons was finished forever, life seemed to be going well for the Haddock family; Stoick remarried, and his new wife has given him a second son. But then the flocks begin to disappear without a trace, forcing the Vikings to the brink of starvation. Clues discovered nearby lead to one conclusion; the Scottish. Rated T just in case. Mericcup.

1. Ships in the Night

A/N: Okay, so this chapter is mostly just filler :/ I don't like it, but it's better than nothing. I get the feeling that it's not enough. Actually, it's shorter than my typical goal. This just barely reaches five pages. The stupid A/N's take up too much space. A necessary evil, though.

Just a few things to keep anyone from getting confuzzled(yes, I make up words). When I got the idea for this, I thought Hiccup was thirteen in the movie, and so going by that I made one of my OC's, Elin(Eel-in), four. Which would mean that roughly a year after the events of the movie, Stoick married Ophelia, and Elin was born soon after. Hiccup is eighteen, and I'll try and touch on every character a little more in future chapters. This one is mostly setting the scene and all that fun stuff -.-

Disclaimer: I'm only saying this once, so: **I do not own Hiccup, Toothless, Stoick, Merida, or any other original characters, settings, or stories that originated in 'How To Train Your Dragon' or 'Brave'. I own nothing but the plot to this fanfiction and my original characters.**

Reviewer responses at the end of chapters.

-MV

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Braving Dragons

Chapter 1

There was something invigorating about the early morning air. While always cold, it was even more so before the sun rose. But more than cold. It was reviving, almost sacred. As the sun began to peer over the horizon, golden rays kissing the snowcapped peaks of the formidable island of Berk, a dark figure shot higher and higher into the sky, pushing past the clouds with a fierce determination. It's long black wings flapped powerfully, majestic forest green eyes alight with pleasure as it's pink tongue hung out the side of it's mouth.

"High enough?" asked the young man clinging to the neck of the mighty animal. The massive reptile beneath him bellowed, and the sound reverberated through him. When he didn't get another answer, he turned his head to look over his shoulder. A small boy was clinging to his waist, staring at the world beneath them as it shrank. "Elin?" The boy turned to him, grinning his wild gap tooth smile.

"Higher!" he squealed. The older boy mirrored his smile exactly.

"Okay then!" He patted the head of the dragon they were ridding. "Well, you heard him, bud." The Night Fury obliged happily, taking them ever higher, surpassing the peaks and bathing them in warm light. The older boy closed his eyes a moment, savoring the feeling. It was on mornings like this that he could go back, in his mind, to the first day he'd flown, really flown, with Toothless. The day he learned to fly without a cheat sheet. He opened his emerald eyes as a sudden breeze shoved against them, one hand leaving the handholds on the saddle to steady the horned helmet that covered his auburn hair. He glanced at the boy behind him again, four years old and loving every second. Well, he would- it was his first flight without his father. Our father, Hiccup corrected himself, his smile widening. He'd been a bit skeptical at first when his father had gotten married again. Anyone who grew up as a single child would, especially one who lost their mother at a young age. But as time went on, he got more and more comfortable around Ophelia the Fearless, who happened to be one of the daughters of the chief of the Shivering Shores. That was how Stoick had met her, at one of his yearly meetings.

But, if he were being completely honest, Hiccup would have to admit that he'd completely accepted her when she'd become pregnant. His father, overjoyed. His village, ecstatic, and secretly relieved. Himself? He'd been looking forward to having a little brother or sister, no matter if they were half-siblings or not. And, nine months later, they'd been blessed with Elin the Scourge Haddock. Elin, who'd been born in the dead of night in the middle of winter with a touch of pneumonia. Elin, who'd been bitten by a conger eel when he was three, and had a scar four inches long on his arm to prove it. Elin, who wasn't technically allowed to ride Toothless, nor any dragon for that matter, without his parents. But then, once in awhile couldn't hurt anyone. Hiccup reached back to pat his brother's knee.

"Okay, ready?" he called above the wind.

"Ready!" Elin shouted back, hugging his arms more tightly around

Hiccup's waist. Toothless leveled out, then pointed his nose down at the sea. There was that one moment of stillness, the three of them suspended in the air, where no one else could be. Invigorating. Refreshing. Sacred.

Then the gut-wrenching drop.

The whispering breezes began to howl, cold cutting like a knife through their fur vests and boots, heavy woolen tunics and leggings. They plummeted through the clouds, suddenly feeling weightless. Behind him, he became aware of Elin's screams of delight. A smile crept onto Hiccup's face. He nudged the dragon's side, and Toothless curved into a corkscrew. Mere miles above the ground, the dragon spread his wings and glided over the treetops dusted with snow, causing a gust of wind to knock it from the branches. They swerved left, then right, angled upward, spun sharply. They soared over the land, past the shores and the docks. Again they climbed, this time at an angle, and were soon above the clouds. Weaving between them, rushing through them, the fluffy masses obscuring everything else from sight. He risked another glance, and saw Elin's eyes wide open and filled with wonder. The boy turned to him, giving him a gap-toothed smile of admiration. His brother, the dragon rider. The dragon tamer. His hero. Hiccup turned back around as Toothless began to dive, more slowly this time, and they left the world of clouds behind, dipping low over the sea. Hiccup couldn't help but look down, where only months ago massive schools of cod and mackerel would have shied away from them, great silver forests beneath the calm waters. Now there was nothing. Elin released his hold on his brother to clap his hands excitedly.

"Again! Again, Hiccup!" he cheered. Hiccup reached behind him and pulled his little brother into his lap.

"Sorry, Elin. But we gotta go back now." Elin stuck out his lower lip in a pout, crossing his arms over his chest. Hiccup arched an eyebrow at him. "Yeah, that's intimidating." he teased. Elin giggled in spite of himself, hugging his brother again. Hiccup felt the toddler shiver, and took it as a sign it was time to head in. Effortlessly, he turned Toothless back towards the island. He'd have liked to fly with Elin all day, but he had things to do. Aside from that, they weren't really supposed to be flying in the first place, so he wanted to get Elin back before anyone noticed. At least, those were the reasons he let himself dwell on. Had he not been ignoring it, he would have admitted he were more worried about how labored Toothless' breathing was as he beat his mighty wings.

By the time they got back to Berk, the village was starting to wake up. Toothless landed behind the cluster of houses, on the frosted grass of the animal pasture. The last of their flocks had been slaughtered just days earlier, something they'd been forced to fall back on since the fish had mysteriously disappeared. Hiccup slipped off of Toothless and walked beside him as they headed for home. Winter was finally coming close to an end, but spring was still a little further off than the Hairy Hooligan tribe would have liked. A blanket of fresh snow covered the ground, up to Hiccup's knees in some places on the path. Elin wisely stayed on the dragon's back.

"Is da' comin' home?" he asked. Hiccup nodded.

"Should be, I think. You remember the deal, right?" Elin nodded.

"I won't tell." he promised. Once they reached the plaza, Hiccup scooped the smaller boy up and set his feet on the ground. Though he didn't see their parents, Elin knew which way the house was. Normally, Hiccup would have taken him home, but he was late for dragon training.

"I'll see you later, alright?" Hiccup said. "Go straight home." Elin looked like he was about to pout again.

"I wanna go with you." he said quietly. Hiccup smiled softly. He had to be careful about this. Small as he was, once Elin started crying, he was likely to wake the dead.

"It's not fun right now. We're not flying, the dragons don't even come." he said, rolling his eyes in mock-annoyance. "I wish I didn't have to go. It's so boring." Elin frowned and pointed at the Night Fury.

"Why Toothless?" he asked. Hiccup mentally winced. He should have seen that coming. He patted the Night Fury's head.

"To keep the Terrible Terrors out." This seemed to pacify Elin, who hugged Hiccup around his knees once before doing the same to Toothless. He ran off towards their house, waving at his brother before disappearing into the crowd of Vikings that were beginning to fill the plaza. Hiccup let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding and grinned. He'd been wanting to fly with Elin for some time now. So, in fact, had Toothless. Dragon and rider couldn't clearly remember the last time they'd taken a morning flight. It had been a while. Hiccup shoved the thought away from his mind as he turned on his heel towards the training ring, Toothless at his side. The dragon gave an inquisitive purr as he trotted to keep up with the human. Hiccup didn't like being in the plaza, not now. It wasâ€¦concerning, to say the least. He glanced at the Night Fury, only for a moment, and accidentally bumped into Gobber.

"Ah, there ye are Hiccup!" Gobber said, surprised. "Astrid was just lookin' fer you. Headed to the ring?" Hiccup nodded, feeling the back of his neck and looking down at his prosthetic.

"Oh, yeah, I'm kinda late. Got caught up in, ah, some things. S-see you later!" he stuttered shortly, continuing his path toward the ring. He heard Gobber call something after him, and he felt a stab of regret, but he didn't turn around. That had been happening more and more lately. He just couldn't seem to look anyone in the eye. At least, not anyone who had suffered fromâ€¦that. Although suffering probably wasn't the right word. Everyone was suffering from it, feeling it, but only a handful of people were beginning to _look it.

Hiccup slowed to a walk as his lungs began to burn. Normally, he could run to the ring clear from his house without a problem. Having to help with the dragons and everything over the years had helped get him in shape physically. He should have been able to now. Heaving a sigh, he pulled at his hair as the ring came into view. He was tired. That was happening more often now. And it wasn't just him. For a moment, he was envious of Elin. Children his age hadn't seemed to notice yet, and hopefully things would get better before they did.

Spring was coming. Soon they'd be able to send either a raiding party or send someone to trade for more animals, for more food. Maybe they could last until then. Maybe-

Toothless nudged his side suddenly, pulling Hiccup from his thoughts. He hadn't realized he had stopped to lean against a boulder. Toothless cooed at him, looking him up and down. The young man grinned at his dragon.

"Nah, I'm fine, bud." he said, catching his breath. "It's gonna be fine." In truth, things were going from bad to worse. There wasn't enough food for the Hooligans, let alone the dragons. They'd resorted to cutting up eel and mixing it in with their food, but while most of the dragons either didn't notice or didn't care, others still had the tendency to be extremely picky about their food. Toothless was one of them. Hiccup stroked the Night Fury's side, all too aware of how well he could feel his ribcage. "You did great today, bud," Hiccup praised, distracting himself. "Did you see the look on his face?" Toothless gave his gummy smile, and they pressed on. Astrid waited near the entrance to the ring, her hands on her hips. She fixed him with a look.

"Where were you?" she quipped. Hiccup shrugged.

"Uhâ€|slept in." he tried. Failed. He was a horrible liar. Astrid rolled her eyes.

"I went to your house and asked Ophelia. She told me you left early this morning." Hiccup froze at the mention of his step-mother. She knew he'd left. But did she know he'd taken Elin? Or where they were going?

"Uhâ€|what else did she say?" he asked. Astrid growled, irritated.

"What does it matter? We were supposed to start target practice today!" she gestured at Toothless. "Is he even going to be able to participate?" Hiccup glared at her.

"Astrid, he's a Night Fury. A Night Fury never misses. He doesn't need to practice target shooting." She seemed to deflate a little, having forgotten that small fact. She growled and kicked a rock next to her boot. His gaze softened, and he put a hand on her shoulder. She rounded on him, her blue eyes bloodshot and angry, but she seemed to calm down a little.

"I'm...sorry, Hiccup, but I justâ€|" she trailed off. She didn't finish. Didn't have to. Everyone was feeling run down and worn out lately. It frustrated her, and when Astrid got frustrated, she had a short fuse. Well, shorter than normal. Hiccup offered a small smile.

"I know. Sorry I'm late, I hadâ€|things to do." She shot him a look.

"Your dad's gonna kill you if he finds out." Hiccup shrugged again.

"Meh, it's fine." They walked into the ring, where the other teens were waiting with a few of their dragons. Missing were Meatlug and

the Thorston's Zippelback, BarfBelch. Stormfly and Hookfang were sitting off to the side, the Nadder hissing at the Monstrous Nightmare, who seemed just as upset with her. Snotlout was arguing with Tuffnut, rather loudly at that. Fishlegs looked up from where he was sitting, more or less twiddling his thumbs and watching what would probably turn into a fight.

"Meatlug wasn't feeling very good this morning." Fishlegs mumbled as Hiccup walked up to him. "I told her she could stay home. Is that okay?" Hiccup nodded, not really listening.

"Oh yeah? Well if you're so tough, why don't you and Hookfang go and find some sheep?"

"Hello? Because we have to keep the strongest here to defend Berk! Duh!" Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"Guys-"

"When spring comes, I'm going to find those thieves and make them wish they never came here!" Tuffnut continued, ignoring the future chieftain.

"No you won't, cause I'm going to find them first!" Snotlout countered.

"No you won't! You can't even get Hookfang to fire when you need him to, you won't get off the ground for a week!"

"Well you have to have two riders! Where's your sister, huh? Didn't think of that did-" Tuffnut's fist silenced him suddenly. Snotlout was about to strike back, but Astrid got between them, shoving them apart. Hiccup looked around, but Ruffnut wasn't there. He turned to Fishlegs, one eyebrow raised, but before he could ask, the dragon expert answered.

"Ruffnut ate some weird plant. She's sick too." Hiccup slapped a palm over his eye. He could see why Ruffnut would do something like that. Heck, especially Ruffnut. And it figured she wouldn't have known what she was looking at.

"What did she eat?"

"Uh, the healer said it was oleander." Hiccup sighed. That cut them short two dragons and one rider. If it had just been the dragons, they could have gone ahead and practiced. If they'd been missing someone like Fishlegs or Astrid, one of the other riders could have filled them in later on. But Hiccup didn't like the idea of having Tuffnut explain something to his sister. For one thing, he'd probably get it all wrong, and for another, Ruffnut wouldn't listen to him, anyway.

"Okay, I think we should wait until tomorrow." Hiccup said, having finally gotten his friends' attention. "Today we can work onâ€|ummâ€|" Two missing dragons, one missing rider.

"Teamwork."

"Uh, Hiccup?" Fishlegs spoke up uncertainly. "We have an odd number of people."

"I know. We'll go out to Raven Pointe. Tuffnut, you go with Astrid, and Fishlegs, you can go with Snotlout."

"Wait, what're we doing?" Snotlout asked, snapping out of his daze and turning from Astrid to Hiccup. The auburn-haired boy avoided Astrid's gaze, knowing she'd be irritated, to say the least, when he answered,

"We're gonna play capture the flag."

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By the time the sun set, Hiccup was exhausted. He was very tempted to ride Toothless back to the plaza, but walked instead. While the dragons had pretty much sat out that day's training, Toothless had still had to play referee, as Stormfly and Hookfang got along just about as well as their riders. A long, frustrating day indeed.

He couldn't help it; he had to rest. And he couldn't help but notice, as he leaned against the side of one of the sturdy wooden houses, that he wasn't the only one doing so. A group of children ran through the plaza, screaming and laughing in their game, blissfully unaware of the men and women around them, of how much they'd changed. Men and women who, before winter, had been bulky and thick with muscle, were now shadows of themselves. Growing thinner, having to stop more frequently to catch a breath, becoming winded much too easily. Hiccup shut his eyes tight, willing himself not to let his mind wander. He was no exception. He'd lost weight as well, and he had been scrawny to begin with. He wasn't eating as much as he should have been. He wouldn't complain, though. Neither would his father or step-mother. Without a qualm, they were all giving up a little more and more. For Elin. The little boy was their main concern. Stoick was tough. He could handle it. And Hiccup? Well, Hiccup could manage. Every morning, when his little brother roused him from his sleep, and he saw that cheeky, mischievous gap-toothed grin, he was rewarded. Elin was too young to do without. Hiccup would manage just fine.

A sort of protective instinct had begun to develop inside him after Elin had been born. He supposed it was normal. Elin was his brother, after all. But Hiccup had never thought about the bond between siblings before. He'd grown up an only child, so he'd never known how it felt to connect with anyone. Until he met Toothless, that is. Toothless was the closest thing Hiccup had to a sibling before Elin was born. He could remember moments when Toothless had snarled at other dragons getting a little too close to him, or when Toothless had curled his tail around him during some of Berk's more violent storms. He'd been protecting him, the way Hiccup felt he was supposed to protect Elin. He'd been more anxious about the little boy being around dragons than his own mother.

A nudge from Toothless startled Hiccup from his thoughts. He patted the Night Fury's muzzle reassuringly.

"Thanks bud, I'm alright." He started walking again, and this time was able to get to the house without panting. Ophelia and Stoick were sitting beside the fire as he came in. His step-mother smiled warmly at him.

"How did training go today?" she asked. Hiccup blew at his bangs as he removed the helmet from his head.

"It's beenâ€|interesting." he said finally. "It would be more productive if the dragons could fly." She gave him a sympathetic nod.

"We saved ye both dinner." Stoick nodded towards the table. "Elin's upstairs, waitin for ye." Thoughts of food left his mind.

"Okay. Back in a minute." he said, up the stairs before either could stop him. Toothless stayed behind, his head already swallowed from view by the basket of cod and mackerel. As Hiccup walked into the room they shared, he saw Elin peering at him from over a very familiar book. The little boy pointed excitedly to the page he was on.

"I'm gonna fly this dragon." he said confidently. Hiccup sat next to him on the bed, picking up the book. He nodded thoughtfully as he looked at the depiction of the Scaldron. A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth at his memories of his first dealings with one.

"Definitely a fierce dragon. Why this one?"

"Cause they boil water. I can help mommy cook." Hiccup fought to keep a straight face as he set the book aside.

"That's a good idea. Dragons can be pretty helpful, you know." Elin nodded.

"Except Terrors." he said, making a face. "They just get in the way." Hiccup opened his mouth to argue, but nothing came out. Elin had a point. The Terrible Terrors were like cats. They were docile most of the time, but they didn't really do much other than hunt and get underfoot at the worst possible times. They annoyed Toothless to no end, as well. Always crowding him or trying to take his lunch. Not that they'd had any problems recently. The Terrors had all but vanished after the fish disappeared. They probably left to find more food. Only a few had stayed behind, the few that had bonded with Vikings. Most were children. Elin frowned.

"Why did they go?" he asked. Hiccup shrugged, not wanting to bring up the danger they faced. He didn't want to lie to his brother, but Elin didn't need to be afraid of something that might not happen.

"You know how the dragons leave right before Snoggletog?" he asked.
"To have their babies in the south?" Elin nodded.

"Yeah."

"It's probably something like that. I'm sure they'll be back soon enough."

"Like in the spring?" Odin, he hoped so. Right along with the fish. Hiccup nodded, and Elin seemed to relax a bit. "That's good."

"Yep. Right now, though, time to go to bed." Elin made a whining noise.

"I'm not tired though."

"Hmm, how bout if I tell you a story?" Hiccup offered with a smile. The little boy's face brightened.

"'Bout dragons?" His brother gave him a look.

"Do I talk about anything else?" Elin giggled. After he'd tucked him into his bed, Hiccup started to tell him about the time he'd been kidnapped by Alvin the Treacherous. Elin listened for what must've been the thousandth time, his pale green eyes sparkling with admiration. They were interrupted when Stoick suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Hiccup," he said, his tone urgent, and both boys looked up. Stoick nodded downstairs. "The patrol came back; they saw something. We're heading out now." Hiccup stood up, untangling himself from Elin, who had clung to him at the news. The little boy looked up at Hiccup excitedly.

"Can I come? Can I come, Hiccup?" Stoick answered for him.

"No, son. When you're older." He leaned over Elin's bed to ruffle his hair affectionately. "Stay here, an' listen to yer ma." They left before Elin could say anything else. Hiccup and Toothless rushed outside, where the rest of the patrol waited. Astrid, Snotlout, and their dragons greeted them as he climbed up.

"What is it?" he asked. Astrid shook her head.

"Ships, heading this way from the east. It's too dark to see the sails."

"We need to know where they're from," Stoick said, climbing atop his Thunderdrum, Thornado. "Hiccup won't be seen. The rest of us will wait further back for Toothless' signal." His heart pounding in his chest, Hiccup vaguely wondered if Toothless had recovered enough from their forbidden venture that morning to fly now, in the cold, dark night.

He had.

Toothless shot off the ground in an instant, the rest of the dragons not far behind. Some of the men from the patrol took the lead, following the heading where the ships had been seen. In his mind, Hiccup was piecing together a theory. These ships were heading toward Berk, not away from it, which lessened the chance it was the thieves. Still, in the middle of winter, what would any ship be doing way out here? Especially now. A storm could come from nowhere, turning blue-green water black, and in the temperatures this far north, shipwreck meant certain death.

It was a short time later that they finally spotted the ships. A storm was brewing, and thick clouds blocked out the night sky, camouflaging Toothless perfectly. It wasn't just one or two ships. There was a whole fleet of them. Bobbing up and down on the waves, their decks lit with lanterns, but their sails were obscured by the black night. He could see enough of a design to know it was there, but not much else. He nudged the Night Fury in closer, careful to keep to remain hidden. A flurry of movement caught his eye, and he turned in time to see a figure disappear below the deck of one of the ships. A flash of red. Hiccup frowned. Vikings were tough, masculine,

tall. But the figure he'd spotted _wasn't_. It had been tall, lean. Hiccup urged Toothless closer still. That was when he saw it. A sheep, standing on the deck, having gotten loose from wherever it had been held. Toothless dove, nearing the ships and keeping low to the ocean. It had to be the thieves, Hiccup was certain. It had to be-

Then the moon shone through the clouds, it's light falling on the sails so suddenly it was like a blindfold had been pulled away from his eyes. He took in the design on the sail, one that surprised him, making him gasp.

"It can't be!"

o~O~o

First chapter up. Expect another one in a month, give or take a few days J

Now, to the wondertastic people who reviewed to vote.

Random Romantasist 999: Sorry the story you picked didn't win L I was kinda looking forward to doing that one. I'm going to try and do it next, though. And thank you so much for the advice, it's always welcome! I understand your lack of appeal for the Hiccunzel pairing, I ship Mericcup way more. There's a link in my profile to where I ran into a summery of what the blogger thought would make a believable Hiccup/Rapunzel crossover, and I just had to try. It's such an ingenious outline, I couldn't resist. Though I don't have permission to use it. So another reason I'm sort of glad it didn't win. Anyways, I really do hope you're reading this. I appreciate your input so much, I can't tell you.

Justanotherspazzedoutfangil(love the name), T-Biggz, and 'Guest': Here ya go! Hope you guys like it enough to leave feedback, I'd really like to see what you think.

Theresaw2012 and 21SidraCire: Thanks for the votes and title suggestion! Hopefully I'll get that story going one day.

Thanks again! And tell me how this is written. Story flow? Grammar? Imagery? Spelling? This last little bit was rushed, so I apologize for any inconsistencies. I'll reread it, and I'll fix anything I find before I update again. Review plz!

2. Evidence

A/N: Wow. First update and I've already gotten behind. To my credit, I had this all written out before, and I hated it, so I rewrote it, half of it on my iPod. And originally, there were going to be four setup chapters. I've condensed it into three. That aside, my internet has been on and off, so that didn't help things, either. And I still don't like this. And it's not long enough. Really, I just hate setup chapters.

and I kind of posted a drabble fic. I love Treasure Planet, and the idea wouldn't leave me alone, but I didn't want to write a full out story, so 'Brothers' is being updated on a hit-or-miss basis for now.

As always, reviews are appreciated J And I noticed my errors in chapter 1, I just haven't had time to fix them yet.

Another thing, if you guys can leave me some sarcastic quote in the reviews, I'd appreciate it. You could be writing Hiccup's dialogue in future chapters. Also, point out any inconsistencies, typos, and wrong references should you feel the need, I would appreciate it J

-VW

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Chapter 2

Hiccup waited quietly as he watched his father inspect his war hammer, running his big, strong hands over the tarnished metal. He doubt it could have changed much. The last time he'd used it was to ward off a Cauldron on his last fishing trip a week ago. It was something he did whenever he was worried or anxious about something. And it was no mystery why he was doing so now.

"We came as soon as we heard," their visitor spoke up from his place by the fire. "I had to make sure yer tribe would last the winter, that the boys an' their mother were alrigh'." Upon saying this, he offered Hiccup a warm smile.

"The boys are fine, Da'," Ophelia said as she handed her father a mug of mead. They were in the Great Hall, where Chief Ulric and the rest of his crew had been escorted after being led to Berk. Hiccup had been surprised when he'd seen the crest on the sails. A voyage from the Shivering Shores to Berk was a long one, definitely not a trip to be made in the dead of winter. He'd just barely been quick enough to stop his fellow riders and their dragons from setting the entire fleet ablaze.

Stoic, Ulric, Hiccup and Toothless were sitting further away from the rest of the crowd, closer to the fire pit. Ulric had asked to speak with Stoick the next day, after he'd had time to rest, but he had given the Hooligan Chief enough information now to cause Stoic to become unnaturally quiet.

"But ye can' be sure, can you?" he asked, not looking away from his hammer. Ulric sighed.

"It's a serious matter, I know. To think they'd travel all this way, and in winterâ€|" he trailed off.

"But you guys came here." Hiccup spoke up. "And you're alright-"

"Hiccup." Ophelia lightly scolded, and he fell silent. It wasn't his place to be asking about matters that concerned only the chief. She offered him an apologetic smile. "Why don'tcha go an see to Elin? I'm sure he's still awake. Will ye do tha' for me dear?" Hiccup nodded, and excused himself. As he was leaving the Great Hall, he couldn't help but look around for the few familiar faces he knew from the Shivering Shores. There were a few step-relatives here and there that he'd come to either love or loathe, and the blacksmith apprentice

found that he didn't know just who exactly he was looking for. There was something at the back of his mind, nagging at him.

He was probably just tired. Hiccup started when he noticed Toothless wasn't at his side. The Night Fury had fallen asleep where he was sitting. He didn't see any reason to wake him, so Hiccup left him to his well-deserved rest. Since it was so late, the rest of the scouting party had been told to go home. As a result, villagers were crowding the plaza, their wondering whispers reaching Hiccup's ears as he started home. A few of them asked him what Ulric's tribe was doing on Berk, but he could only shrug and answer that he had no idea. He didn't, really. He only knew the basics, that Ophelia's father had somehow gotten wind that Berk was in danger and had set out at once to rescue them. Since the Vikings of the Shivering Shores didn't have very many dragons, and the animals had to be carried by boat anyway, they hadn't been able to send word ahead. And they'd arrived just in time, too.

"Hiccup!" The heir of Berk turned to see Astrid jogging up to him, breaking free from the crowd. "What's going on?" she asked, voicing the same question he must've answered at least five times by now. Since when did Hooligans get so nosy?

"Ulric heard that we needed help. He brought those animals for us." Her shoulders relaxed, and though she was careful to keep her expression guarded, he could tell she was relieved. They all were.

"But why did they bring their warships? I saw them, out in the harbor. They're armed to the teeth, what's going on?" Hiccup hesitated, running his hands through his hair.

"Gahâ€œ! I don't know." he admitted. "Something about whose been stealing our animals. They hit the Shivering Shores too, and I heard Grandpa say they followed them out here."

"So they know who it was then." She suddenly sounded hostile. Had she been holding her axe, he had a feeling she'd have been gripping it with white knuckles.

"They might." he said quietly, and winced. She looked up at him, her blue eyes intense and demanding.

"Who?"

"Astrid, I can't—" he started to object, looking around. They were relatively alone, just a few paces from his front door.

"Tell me." Astrid said, this time a little less threatening. By now she knew that putting pressure on Hiccup didn't work as well as simply being friendly. He sucked his teeth before letting out a sigh.

"They said they saw Scottish sails." An uncomfortable silence stretched between them, and he knew she was thinking of the same thing he was. The bloody raids on the Scottish shores generations back. The past behind the title they'd dubbed them, the Bloody Celts. Although, he had a feeling he remembered more about it than she did. "We haven't dealt with them in almost a hundred and fifty years. Since their clans united, they've been too powerful, but they haven't

bothered with us in just as long." The war with the Scottish had ended when the three clans had united to fight the Vikings, and they'd succeeded. They were too well fortified, with land and numbers on their side whereas Vikings were caught between the seas and battlefield. But nowâ€¦

"We have dragons now." Astrid said thoughtfully. "If they've been taking our food, we can fight back. Hiccup, we can win this time." He made a face, though he was pretty sure it was wasted on her. When Astrid began talking war, she was oblivious to anything else. Hiccup didn't like the idea of using the dragons as weapons. The subject had come up before, at Things and war council meetings, and so far the Hooligans had been able to avoid resorting to it. Now that they had the Shivering Shores at their backs, they were a force to be reckoned with, dragons or no. But in the Scottish war, two Viking tribes had been fighting side by side. And they'd lost anyway.

"We don't know for sure." he cautioned her. "It could just be something that looked like—"

>"If we took their land, we'd be able to reach other villages. Other islands."<p>

"Astridâ€¦" Hiccup groaned. She put her hands on her hips, and even though his head was tilted back so that he was looking at the night sky, he just knew she was giving him a look. The look. Her trademark 'Don't-argue-with-me-because-I'm-right' look. He hated that look. "Justâ€¦don't say anything, okay?" She sighed, and he could tell she was irritated. Still, she nodded.

"Okay, I won't. But if they are Scottish, you know what's going to happen." She left before he could say anything, leaving the seeds of doubt she'd planted in his mind to grow and fester into outright dread. Hiccup almost wished she'd clubbed him over the head with her axe instead.

Almost.

Sure enough, Ophelia's suspicions that her youngest son would still be awake were proven true. Hiccup walked into the house to see the boy sitting on the steps with a toy crossbow in one hand, and Hiccup's stuffed dragon in the other. Hiccup ducked just in time to avoid being impaled by a not-so-fake arrow. It never stopped surprising him how early Vikings started using weapons.

"Where's Mama?" Elin asked, oblivious to injury he'd nearly caused his brother. Hiccup walked over to him and picked him up.

"With dad." He paused a minute, then added, "And Grandpa." Elin's face lit up like a bonfire.

"Grandpa? Grandpa's here?" He started trying to get down. Hiccup readjusted his hold and started upstairs. Elin whined. "I wanna see!"

"I know, but he'll still be here in the morning. He's sleeping right now, too." Well, he would be in a little while, anyway. He could sense a tantrum coming, so he added, "How about a story?" This seemed to calm him down a little, but he still looked unhappy.

"â€¦a Toofis story?" he asked, and Hiccup nodded. "The one with the

Whisperin' Deaf?"

"Whispering Death." Hiccup corrected him. Elin rolled his eyes as Hiccup began the story. His big brother was such a pain sometimes.

o~O~o

"Why are we doing this again?" Hiccup looked over his shoulder to glare at his cousin. "This is stupid! Why would the guy stealing our stuff be hiding out on the dragon island?"

"Uh, because it's close by? Because it's sheltered by fog year round? Because there's a dead volcano that could provide shelter?" Hiccup offered. Snotlout slumped on the neck of his Monstrous Nightmare, Hookfang.

"This trip always takes forever." Hiccup turned around.

"It's only five minutes!"

"So? Flying to Mildew's takes forever when you're there." Hiccup wisely decided to just ignore his cousin. In truth, he wasn't all that happy about their current situation, either. But Ulric had spoken with Stoick that morning. Apparently, the ships they'd been chasing after had been headed in the direction of Berk. They were thinking that the storm would have put them off course, and there was a chance they would have stopped on the dragon isle. At the very least, they were looking for anything unusual. They hadn't found much. Astrid urged Stormfly lower, coming beside Hiccup.

"He's kind of right you know." Hiccup threw her an exasperated look.

"It's a five-

>"Not that. We've been missing animals all winter. That means whoever was taking them would have known about the dragon island, and our dragons." Hiccup sighed.

"It's kind of all we can do for now. If they didn't stop there, then they're probably too far for us to catch up to. There's miles and miles of ocean out there. There's no way we'll find them if we have to search it."

"Even if they did stop there, they won't exactly be sunbathing on the beach. They could hide out in that volcano forever, and we can't spend all day searching one island."

>"Just keep looking." Hiccup groaned. She was right, of course. As usual.<p>

"Just saying." she called back in a sing-song voice before rejoining Fishlegs. Hiccup shook his head and went back to looking below them. Suddenly, he narrowed his eyes. There was something in the water. He moved the tailfin, drawing closer to the sea. As the fog cleared, he realized it was a wooden plank, jagged on one end, as if it had broken. The possibility of a shipwreck made his eyes widen. Their trip hadn't been for nothing.

"Astrid!" he called, and she turned towards him. He held up the plank. "Get closer to the water! Everyone, keep an eye out for a

ship!" The young Vikings and their dragons formed a line and began sweeping over the ocean. The closer they drew to the dragon isle, the more debris they came across. By the time the rock pillars came into view, they'd come across three ships that they weren't sure belonged to Vikings or not. There were no sails. Without a sail to distinguish the culture, Scottish and Viking longships were basically the same, with the exception of a serpent or dragon's figure carved into the hull. The ships had all been destroyed in such a way that the hulls were gone long ago.

They widened their search when the isle came into view. Aside from wood floating in the water and the ships, they hadn't found anything. They landed on the island, and Hiccup divided their group to search that as well.

"Astrid, you and Tuffnut circle around the east side. Snotlout and Fishlegs, you guys take the west side."

>"What about you?" Fishlegs asked. He didn't look too happy to be teaming up with Snotlout, but without Ruffnut along, Barf and Belch were grounded. Which meant Tuffnut had to hitch a ride with someone, and so far that 'someone' had been Astrid. Hiccup didn't want Tuff and 'Lout together, since too much stupid was just a little too unbalanced for his liking, so his hands were tied there. Fish would just have to deal.<p>

"Toothless and I will stay on the beach, see if we can't find anything around here. The winds from that storm might've covered anything left here with sand."

>"At sunset, we start heading back, whether or not we find anything. The dragon's don't have their full strength back yet." Astrid's voice softened near the end as she patted Stormfly affectionately. Hiccup nodded.

"Okay. Let's go." Just as he'd thought, there was more debris scattered in the sand. Progress was slow, and for awhile, he was thinking of searching the volcano alone. Maybe he'd have better luck. After all, he was the most observant of the group. But the thought fled from his mind when his hand suddenly brushed against something. It was big, whatever it was. After digging around a little more, he uncovered part of what he guessed to be the main mast. Attached to it was a sail. Working quickly, Hiccup pulled it free and brushed the sand away. Once it was visible, he stared at the crest, bewildered.

He had no way of knowing if it was Scottish, but he did know that it wasn't a Viking sail. He'd seen the sails of the Berserkers, the Bog Burglars, the Ravenous Tribe, the Shivering Shores, the Outcasts and of course, Berk, and many more, but he wasn't familiar with this symbol. The sail depicted three bear cubs, and the Celtic knots did little to point to Viking origin. Hiccup winced, and turned to Toothless.

"Budâ€|I think we found our thieves."

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Stoick was angry, to say the least. After Hiccup had shown Ulric and Stoick the sail they'd found(Snotlout had insisted it was thanks to him), both chieftains had confirmed what Hiccup had dreaded to hear.

"The Highland clans. DunBroch, this one." Stoick shook his head as he paced the Great Hall, his footsteps echoing in the dark, empty chamber. Ulric looked angry, something that rarely happened.

"Those bloody Celts got the nerve to come into Viking waters, slaughter your livestock, push you to the edge of starvation? That's an act of _war_, Stoick!"

"I _know_ that." Stoick muttered, pulling at his pleated beard in frustration. "But we can't very well just go charging off into war. We don't know for sure they did-"

>"You found their ships just miles from Berk. You found the sail with a DunBroch crest on it. What more proof do ye need?!"

"It's been years since we've 'ad dealin's with the Scotts. My father fought them, laid siege to their land. That's when the clans united, and that's the last we've heard of them 'till no'. Why would they bother with us?"

>"A new generation took over for you. You took over when your father died, as I did. The sons and daughters of the Scotts likely have too, maybe it was for revenge." Ulric said as he waved his sword aloft.

"Whatever the reason, they've all but declared war on Berk. At the very least, I think we should confront them about this."

Stoick nodded, pausing by a mural painted on one of the cavern walls. It depicted the battle fought between Vikings and the Scottish. It showed the glory of the Vikings, of course, though they didn't win. Hiccup knew why it had been created that way, though. "Death in battle. The highest honor for a Viking." Ulric said quietly. Stoick closed his eyes, and Hiccup could tell he was trying to keep his temper at bay. His grandfather, Hamish Horrendous Haddock the second, had been killed in the war with the Scottish. Stoick had been just a little older than Hiccup at the time. His father had been there, when the Hooligan chieftain had passed away at the hands of the Scottish. He kept silent the entire time, because it wasn't his place to argue with Ulric or his father, but he was desperately hoping they'd come to some other conclusion. His hopes were dashed as Stoick spoke again.

"When spring comes, we'll seek and audience with them. Only a few of us. Hide the armada in the lands south of there. Dragons too. If they won't make amends for what they've doneâ€|" he left the threat unspoken, but it was obvious what he meant. Hiccup opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. What could he say? Of the options they had right now, Stoick's decision was the most reasonable one. It wasn't like he could suggest that the Hairy Hooligans simply let it go, either.

Astrid was waiting for him when he left the great Hall. She'd seen the sail, and her warrior's blood had been getting steadily hotter ever since. She cornered him now, blue eyes imploring him for details.

"Well? Was it them? What's Stoick going to do?" Hiccup blew his bangs away from his eyes.

"Uhâ€|I can't really—" Aaaand there was the other Look. Her 'Tell-me-what-I-want-to-know-before-I-hit-you' look. Though she didn't really _physically_ hit him anymore, she did verbally. He relented. "It's a Scottish sail. Dad said in the spring we're going

to order a conference with them. Don't tell anyone else." he added, but he doubted whether or not she heard him. He could practically see the warrior rising to the surface again.

There was a Thing in the plaza that night, during which Stoick explained the disappearance of their animals, their suspicions, and the findings which had confirmed them. He explained the plan of seeking an audience with the King and Queen of the clan that was thought to be the cause of the offense. Someone asked about battle plans, but Stoick said that for now, they weren't going to plan for war. They were, however, going to be collecting the armadas of both Berk and the Shivering Shores, as well as the bulk of their dragons, for the journey to Scotland. This was met with cheers of approval, and regardless of the official declaration of war, everyone began talking at once of battle strategies. It had been a very long time since the Hooligans had been to war, not since the war with the dragons had been settled. There had been skirmishes with the Berserker tribe here and there, but though Dagahr claimed to be ready for war, he was sadly lacking in strategy, and therefore their conflicts with that tribe weren't taken all that seriously. Now it seemed as though they would have the chance to shed blood for the first time in many years.

"Hiccup!" Tuffnut called, and he and his sister(who, though a little pale, was out and about by now) ran up to the Night Fury and his rider. "Chief says everyone old enough to fight is going with the rest of them in the spring!" He was excited. Of course he was excited. Looking around, Hiccup noticed that he seemed to be the only one who wasn't in the mood to celebrate. Which was kind of expected, given the whole 'least-vikingly-Viking' complex he'd had since his childhood. It took him a minute to realize Tuff was still talking.
"going to be so filthy rich when we come home-"

"You'll just be filthy." Ruffnut interrupted.

"Because I'll be covered in enemy blood!"

>"Or your own-" She swallowed the rest of her insult along with her brother's fist. Hiccup sidestepped the fight with practiced ease and left the plaza. He and Toothless left the village behind, and though he had no set destination in mind, Hiccup wasn't surprised to see he'd led them to their cove past Raven Pointe. Toothless bounded over to a rock that was probably still warm from the sun, but Hiccup sat by the pond. He absent-mindedly began sketching in the dirt, the image of a Changewing taking shape as he muttered his thoughts out loud.<p>

"Everything will be fine. It'll all work out, dad wouldn't go to war just because he thought the Scottish were behind this. He's going to talk to them, and it'll all be okay." Toothless cocked his head to one side. "Okay, well, we don't know for sure if they meant to hurt us or not. So really, it could all be a misunderstanding and we'll leave in peace. Nobody dies." Toothless snorted before curling up on his side, facing away from his rider. Hiccup tossed the twig at his back, but it fell short by an embarrassing distance. "There's a chance it'll work out like that, you know. My father isn't Dagahr. Aside from the dragons, the Hooligans have never been in a serious war since he became chief. My dad always tries to go for the most reasonable option." Having said this, he realized that the way Stoick dealt with matters like these wasn't typically the traditional Viking way, either. But Stoick wasn't un -Vikingly. He was just a

peaceable Viking. However, their tribe had almost starved to death. Had it not been for Ulric, they would have begun to lose the lives of innocent people in a short amount of time.

Even though he was speaking the truth, Hiccup knew he was being just a little too optimistic. They were Vikings. They found a Scottish sail. Two cultures, between which the bad blood ran thick. War was inevitable, if not now, then later. In exactly a month, the Hairy Hooligans would be headed for the shores of the Scottish Highlands, their armada and dragon army in tow. He could only hope that his father would be able to reason with the Chieftain of the clan, and avoid the bloodbath Vikings were capable of.

3. Coming Off Hiatus

A/N: For everyone who got an alert bout this story and got excited for more fanfiction, I apologize. I've been in that situation and while I appreciated the author's efforts, I was disappointed. Anyway, I've decided to call off the Hiatus finally, since I've more or less solved my problem. I'm still having issues writing for Merida. It's really that hard for me. So I've decided to continue to focus on Hiccup, which means (1) no Merida for awhile longer, (2) an update sooner than expected :) I'm actually halfway through writing the next chapter, and getting closer to finishing it today- I'm planning on writing after I post this note.

Your reviews and follows really helped me to get back on track. I cannot thank you guys enough, and hopefully your patience will not have been for nothing. Thank you so much for your continued patient support!

Also, since he's made several appearances in Defenders of Berk by now, would anyone be interested if I added Dagur to the story? Let me know :)

-Mitchie

End
file.